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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

18 August 1955

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 52-55

SUBJECT: Position of the Italian Communist Party*

1. Since publication of our last Italian estimate in November 1954, several major developments have evoked considerable speculation as to the strength and prospects of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Loss of dynamism by the PCI, dissension within the PCI organization, indications of weakened Communist control over labor, PCI losses in the Sicilian elections, and increased agitation for an "opening to the left" designed to separate the PCI from its Nenni Socialist (PSI) allies are viewed in many quarters as harbingers of declining Italian Communist political strength.

2. Loss of dynamism. With its elan diminishing and its activism decreasing, the PCI apparently no longer has the same attraction for many Italians who once considered it the lodestar of Italian politics. Many dedicated revolutionaries who formerly regarded their accession to power as imminent, as well as those numerous Italians who prudently aligned themselves with the "wave of the future", now seem much less confident that the Communists will in time govern Italy. With the recruiting rate apparently declining, particularly among the youth, further Communist loss of panache could have an important long-term impact on PCI membership. Perhaps because of general disenchantment with Soviet policy or Togliatti's moderate line, there seems to be some decrease in the PCI's ideological appeal, although so long as there is no other satisfactory non-Communist alternative, the PCI and PSI will continue to derive much electoral strength from "protest votes".

* The substance of this memorandum has been discussed with representatives of O/Ci and DD/P.

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3. PCI internal differences. Cracks in the monolithic PCI structure have clearly appeared during the year. Latent internal party disputes between advocates of "tough" and "soft" policies flared into the open at the PCI National Congress. These frictions were aggravated by the need to accommodate the party line hastily to such international developments as Malenkov's fall, the Soviet policy reversal on Trieste, the "humble pie" eating at Belgrade, and Moscow's overtures to Adenauer. The dimensions of the alleged challenge to Togliatti's leadership and unrest in party ranks are unclear, but such disputes and the precarious state of his health make it likely that Togliatti will not continue to dominate the PCI as he has in the past.

4. The labor situation. The PCI's control over the majority of organized labor appears to have been somewhat weakened recently by more effective non-communist union competition. In the nationally-important "Conglobamento" wage negotiations non-Communist unions achieved an unprecedented agreement with employers without the participation of the Communist-dominated CGIL. Also, the victories of those unions in certain factory elections not only gave them a much-needed fillip, but provoked controversy within the CGIL hierarchy over allocation of blame for its losses. Further instances of free union effectiveness might increasingly encourage both workers and employers, who previously considered it essential to handle labor problems through the CGIL, to turn to non-Communist unions. On the other hand, some of these free union victories may have stemmed primarily from a desire to avoid loss of OSP contracts, and their long-range significance should not be overemphasized. Moreover, there are no indications of large-scale defections from the CGIL.

5. The Sicilian elections. While the PCI has registered limited gains in local elections, no marked changes in the PCI's electoral strength have occurred since the 1953 national elections. In the recent Sicilian elections, however, the PCI's percentage of votes dropped slightly from that in 1953. Since Nenni's PSI made small gains, Left Bloc representation in the Sicilian legislature remained unchanged. This development nevertheless has some negative significance, because the PCI, with its strength in northern Italy roughly stabilized apparently has been looking to the South as a potential reservoir of new votes.

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6. The "opening to the left". Since they furnish more than one-third of the Left Bloc's* political strength, the Nenni Socialists are vital to the PCI's capacity for obstructing parliamentary procedure. Increased rumors that the Nenni Socialists will desert their Communist allies have followed PSI gains in the Sicilian elections and the election of President Gronchi, who encourages a leftward shift in Christian Democratic (CD) alignments. While Nenni has indicated his willingness to cooperate with left-wing CD elements, he has made no concomitant move to renounce the PCI-PSI "unity of action" pact. There is no firm evidence that he either will or can do so, or that his personal interests would be furthered by a break with the PCI. Moreover, the left-wing Christian Democrats probably will not be able to move far in encouraging a Nenni defection without risking a break-up of their party.

7. Even if a formal PCI-PSI break does take place in the near future, it is as likely to be a Communist-inspired maneuver as a genuine Nenni conversion to the left-center. Thus, there is an even chance that such a split would ultimately, if not immediately, benefit the PCI. While the enigmatic Nenni's future gambits will probably have an increasingly important impact on the Italian political scene, it therefore appears that his maneuvers probably involve as much potential danger for the Christian Democratic Party as for the PCI.

8. Conclusions. As a political organization the PCI has lost much of its original vitality and momentum. However, the PCI's electoral influence is still great and is likely to remain strong as long as certain fundamental political factors remain operative. Its future political strength therefore will continue to depend at least as much on external developments as upon its own cohesion and dynamism. As stated in NIE 24-54, "...the basic political appeal of the Left Bloc probably cannot be substantially reduced as long as the hope of amelioration of unsatisfactory political, economic and social conditions by a democratic regime

*The Left Bloc of the PCI and PSI controls 37 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

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remain frustrated." Moreover, with the Nenni Socialists contributing over one-third of the Left Bloc's political strength, a reduction of the PCI's power depends to a large extent on weaning Nenni away from his Communist allies. The continued absence of any other effective political party on the non-Communist left probably must also be overcome if the Left Bloc is to suffer a serious electoral setback.

9. The outlook for a decrease in PCI electoral strength in the light of these factors is not propitious. Disunity among the anti-Communist forces, factionalism within the Christian Democratic Party, and the slackening of world tensions are making it difficult either to illustrate convincingly the Communist danger or to take repressive action against the PCI. Faced with huge long-range social and economic problems, Italian governments over the past few years have been unable to make sufficient progress substantially to reduce widespread discontent. It appears that the PCI for the foreseeable future will be able to employ this dissatisfaction as an effective electoral issue.

10. In sum, we believe that the PCI will remain a major though somewhat less vigorous political force than in the past. Some further decline in PCI and CGIL membership seems likely. We therefore would not now predict with the same confidence as NIE 24-54 that "... a further growth in Communist-Nenni Socialist strength is probable." However, even though the steady increase in the PCI's electoral influence over the past several years may have been temporarily halted, it has not been clearly reversed. On balance, therefore, PCI electoral strength on a national basis will probably not fall much below present levels over the next few years. Moreover, with the possibility of PSI gains offsetting any PCI losses, the Left Bloc, if it holds together, will probably maintain approximately its present electoral strength during the same period, or might even register small gains in some areas.

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